

Books

Indiana's
Americana

Gilda Williams

Gary Indiana, *Let It Bleed, Essays 1985-1995*, Serpent's Tail, High Risk Books, New York/London, 1996, 246pp, £11, 1 85242 332 3

There was a time in the mid to late 80s when people bought the *Village Voice* mostly for the art reviews, and that was because Gary Indiana was writing them. Art critic, political reporter, literary reviewer, playwright and novelist, Indiana can be savoured in the thoroughly enjoyable *Let it Bleed*, a collection of some 40 essays by one of the wittiest, most committed writers in America. His details and analogies – at Euro-Disney: 'It was late in the day and midgets were casting giant shadows'; on fading art stars: 'The power decides, one bored afternoon, to add you to the menu instead of inviting you to eat' – are imaginative, totally unexpected, slamming into their targets like missiles. On top of the pleasure you get from reading him, you even come away with an informed opinion, for example in his deconstruction of Gilbert & George: 'Their art must somehow mimic whatever intricate, predatory formalities are involved in luring these teenage Adonises with rotten teeth home to the studio'. And while many of his reviews are actually quite positive and admiring, his humour really shines when he is at his damning best, making the bad guys look really bad, often just by quoting his enemies for the reader to contrast their plodding, clichéd style with his own biting, effortless prose.

Indiana's coverage of anything from the Rodney King trial to euthanasia or the porn industry is always framed by his liberal politics; like a good old-fashioned, truth-seeking reporter, he drags you with him into the courtroom, into the hospital ward or onto the poolside film set. He has no time for poetry or theory; you will never catch him spewing Lacan off a press release. He is the guy front-centre in the mud pit, interviewing porn extras, following the 1992 presidential campaign, stalking Mickey Mouse at Euro-

Disney. Ultimately Indiana belongs to a long-gone generation of hard-hitting writers and muck-rakers like Dorothy Parker and Jessica Mitford: likeable, brainy journalists ripping their dull, fascistic opponents to bits with a few merciless witticisms, all played against the passions of their private lives.

Like them, Indiana tempers his enviable, even heroic talent by throwing in the details of his own insecurities, injecting a personal, even pathetic subtext into his work, like in the old days when a story was heightened by its 'human interest' angle. His essay on Euro-Disney, for example, is wrapped around the unrelated chronicle of his misery over a doomed love affair which is wrecking his whole trip to France. At times he lapses incongruously into reciting the AM radio lyrics which are reducing him to tears before breakfast. I remember reading his first novel *Horse Crazy*, an autobiographical (I can only assume) account of a drawn-out, disastrous relationship with some Matt Dillon look-alike, and wondering why on earth Indiana, after spending months, maybe years chasing this self-absorbed, trophy boyfriend, would waste even more time writing this book, moreover actually publishing a detailed account of his humiliation. But without the pathetic persona, he would merely be a haughty virtuoso, bitching about the movies ('Preminger's best movies are unforgettable, and so are his worst ones. It is often difficult to tell which are which'), the art world ('Serra has obviously read *The Fountainhead* and thinks [moving the *Tilted Arc*] would be a deadly compromise with squat-minded office sheep') and so much hubris of a decade's worth of Americana.

Throughout, the grain against which most of his essays are written (particularly his journalistic reportage and book reviews, which make up the bulk of *Let it Bleed*) is always mainstream American culture, to which he is permanently excluded. A New Yorker, a non-heterosexual, a contemporary art lover, he just doesn't have what it takes to be healthy and popular in the Last Remaining Superpower. This is a country, he reminds us, whose puritanical founding fathers viewed even masturbation as 'a criminal waste of capital-intensive energy'. He doesn't really mind not fitting in.

For my money the best essay in the book is 'Town of the Living Dead', a travel-log of his visit to suburban Branson, a Missouri tourist attraction (two terms rarely found in

the same sentence) now transformed into America's fastest growing resort, a place where they serve 'huge portions of the worst food on the Continent'. Branson is an Oz of right-wing entertainment which is provided by America's least charismatic stars, now fading from a glory which never actually happened. In Branson, amusements the whole family can enjoy include 'a geography game to teach youngsters the often confusing difference between, for example, Canada and Mexico'. Indiana is really in his element here; this place is campy, oppressive, hideous, and he can fully revel in his skewed, New York-faggot-commie persona. 'A star, as any American 12-year-old understands, is someone a great many people would like to fuck. But in Branson, a star is a kind of ideal family member'. He is especially vehement in his critique of anti-gay zealot, former Miss America Anita Bryant, whose stage show concludes with theme songs from each of the armed forces and a giant stars-and-stripes beamed across the backstage. 'By the end of her show Anita Bryant has pushed every Branson button so hard that this audience would forgive her if she confessed to murdering the Lindbergh baby'. A good comic line, which moreover connects this chirpy, evangelical patriotism with truly evil, criminal behaviour – which is basically his point all along.

After cruising through the issues, the characters, the personal crises – all at breakneck speed – strangely enough Indiana isn't very good at endings. His essays tend to come to a screeching halt, as if he could go on all day if it weren't for his editor's word count, and their conversational manner makes it difficult to find a natural point of closure. Gary Indiana is like the guy who pulls you aside at an otherwise awful party, the sensationally funny stranger who inexplicably confesses all the intricacies of his latest affair while giving a running sarcastic commentary on passing guests. Suddenly only you and he alone can really see through all this. Then just as unexpectedly, mid-sentence, he is gone – off to amuse the next lucky guy. ■

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